

THE CALLIGRAPHIC DECALOGUE

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Western man has always felt the need to find a unifying principle, an underlying uniformity, in terms of which to explain the apparent diversity surrounding him. In logology, the search is on for a sort of universal catalyst - an operation or transformation to which all words and names, regardless of their length or letter constitution, can be subjected, changing them to other words or names. In the larger world of which logology is a part, scientists are trying to identify one tiny particle, of various aggregations and arrangements of which everything in the universe consists.

Sweeping reductionism of the sort just exemplified must always fail. There is not, there cannot be, a fundamental particle of which all nature consists. No matter how many times the quest for ultimate uniformity and simplicity fails, however, it will continue, for it satisfies some sort of overriding psychological need in human beings.

On a smaller, more limited scale, reductionist success is very occasionally possible. I have just achieved such a success in applying logology to one of the language arts. Precisely because the field of application is also within the domain of language, I present my success in the pages of *Word Ways*. The language area in question is that of CALLIGRAPHY - the art of high-quality HANDWRITING, PENMANSHIP, or CHIROGRAPHY. Note, incidentally, that with the exception of a seemingly missing letter in PENMANSHIP, all four of these words are eleven letters long. The uniformity is a pleasing one, and reasonably remarkable, for there are no other English synonyms for the concept under consideration - none longer, none shorter. The letter length at which the four designations for products of the writing craft appear, eleven, is an atypical one - five out of every eight English words are shorter, and those in wide circulation are considerably shorter.

Handwriting experts have always been concerned with teaching their students those characteristics of the art which produce superior penmanship, making it easily legible, pleasing in appearance, and quickly comprehended. A survey of handwriting manuals and language-arts textbooks indicates that there are ten essential such characteristics. What I have succeeded in doing, for the first time ever, is to label or identify each one of them with a word beginning with the letter S. It therefore now becomes possible to speak of the Calligraphic Decalogue: the ten principles or guidelines that must be followed by anyone who wants to master excellent handwrit-

ing. My reductionism has converted that Decalogue into the ten Ss. This article sets forth the details of my triumph. If readers believe that I have overlooked some essential aspect of chirography, I shall be delighted to consider their additions, even though speaking of a Hendecalogue or an Dodecalogue would be quite unorthodox.

1. SCRIPT SEPARATION (two Ss for the price of one!). American elementary schools generally teach two different scripts - manuscript writing or printscript in the first two or three grades, and cursive writing or the running hand thereafter. Manuscript writing looks much like print or typing; cursive writing, like conventional longhand. The first rule of good handwriting is, consequently, never to mix these two kinds of script. If you are writing a note, a letter, a composition, an essay, or anything else, keep the two scripts separate: use either one or the other, but do not switch back and forth between them - a mixture of letter shapes or styles confuses the reader.

2. STANDARDIZATION. Within each of the two basic scripts, numerous variations in letterform exist. Handwriting manuals illustrate as many as six different manuscript forms, and as many as ten different cursive forms, for one letter of the alphabet. Decide which set of letterforms you are going to use and stick to it instead of vacillating between alternative letterforms, as whim dictates. Your standardization of the forms used makes it easier for the reader to understand what you have written.

3. SET. To make your writing uniform and pleasing in appearance, set the body of each letter on the so-called "line" or baseline. In cursive script, some lowercase or minuscule letters have descenders going below the line, but the body of the letter must be on the baseline, not higher or lower. By following this rule, you achieve perfect alignment of your letters with each other.

4. SHAPE. Form your letters correctly, giving them their accepted shapes. Keep straight lines straight and curved lines rounded; close letters and letter loops (such as those of the lowercase cursive D, G and K) that should be closed; cross your lowercase Ts and dot your lowercase ls and Js; leave the loops of letters such as the minuscule L and Y open; and forgo creating unnecessary loops, such as those that make a small T look like L, or a small l like E. Correct shape includes such things as not making your letters too tall and thin, or too short and wide. It also includes taking care not to make certain small letters look too much alike: A and O, or D and CL, or N, R, and V.

5. SIZE AND RELATIVE PROPORTION. Make your letters in any given letter classification uniform in size. Capital letters must always fill the entire space between the baseline and the headline (the real or imaginary line indicating the top of the letter space). In manuscript writing, minuscule letters are one-half the height of majuscule letters; in the so-called transitional cursive taught as a preliminary to the regular or adult cursive, minuscule letters without ascenders or descenders are one-half the height of majuscule letters; in regular or adult cursive, one-third the height.

Small letters with ascenders must normally either touch or almost touch the headline. If small letters have descenders, those descenders must extend below the baseline for a distance equal to two-thirds of the distance between the baseline and the headline. Three of the small letters with ascenders - D, P, and T - are exceptions to the general rule: they must be taller than small letters without ascenders but shorter than other small letters with ascenders. More generally, make your letters neither too small nor too large in relation to the size of the page on which you are writing.

6. SLANT. Manuscript letters* should either be vertical or slant slightly to the right. Cursive letters should slant somewhat to the right if you are a dextral or right-hander, or slightly to the left if you are a sinistral or left-hander. If you are ambidextrous, you have a choice of slant; if ambisinister, ambisinistrous, or ambilevous, you are probably beyond help. In no case may the slant be either extreme or irregular: a uniform, moderate slant makes for reading comfort and ease.

7. STEADINESS or SMOOTHNESS (once again, a doubleheader bargain!). Your letters should be steady and even, not tremulous or vibratory. Their latter condition suggests instability on the writer's part - emotional disequilibrium, poor health, or extremely young or advanced age.

8. STROKE. In cursive writing, letters have beginning, ending, and joining strokes. Make those strokes correctly, aligning them properly with the baseline.

9. SPACING. The letters of a given word must be spaced clearly and uniformly. They must be neither too far apart nor too close together. In cursive writing, joining strokes should leave enough room between adjacent letters so that they are legible - try to avoid sharp, abrupt swings, crowding consecutive letters, and any swings that are too long, stretching words out unnaturally. Leave suitable and uniform spaces between consecutive words, so that you space them evenly across the page. Watch vertical spacing as well: in cursive writing, descenders from the line above may not touch ascenders from the line below.

10. STYLING. This heading covers miscellaneous features of your writing. Write neatly; keep erasures to a minimum, and make those which are unavoidable clean and complete; keep your margins even, making them neither too narrow nor too wide; indent your paragraphs; and use correct capitalization and punctuation.

The ten Ss of good handwriting - the Calligraphic Decalogue - may be a unique phenomenon. If readers know of a comparable uniformity in some other field, let them speak up!